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CIA Retreating Into Its Shell

The ballyhooed and battered Central Intelligence Agency, which has received more publicity than government agencies that advertise, is quietly pulling back into its shell.

The traffic in embarrassing secrets, known inside the agency as "the family jewels," is being shut off. Even members of Congress, who are supposed to review CIA secrets, have complained privately that the intelligence agencies are holding back.

Senate Minority Leader Howard H. Baker Jr. (R-Tenn.) complained vociferously at a closed White House meeting that it had taken him two years to get some sensitive information out of the CIA. Grumped another insider: "The CIA is never easy to work with, the FBI is interested in covering their butts and the NSA [National Security Agency] is incredibly tight-lipped as a matter of general principle."

But other members of the Senate and House Intelligence committees told us the intelligence agencies are "cooperative," "frank" and "forthcoming."

There is no question, however, that the CIA is quietly turning off the embarrassing leaks. Government lawyers deliberately filed their lawsuit against ex-CIA analyst Frank Sneed in Virginia, for example, knowing the judges were pro-government and security-minded.

District Judge Oren Lewis slapped down Sneed for writing an unauthorized book about the CIA. At times, the judge's voice rose angrily as he declared that Sneed had no right to divulge "classified information" and that he was not entitled to a jury trial.

"We are not going to make the CIA be exposed any more than they have been," snorted Lewis.

In point of fact, the government did not accuse Sneed of revealing classified information. He charged in his book that the CIA had left behind in Vietnam not only computerized files of agents and collaborators but also many of the unfortunate collaborators themselves. The files were captured intact by the North Vietnamese.

Thus it was Sneed accusing the CIA of violating security and jeopardizing lives, not the other way around. Yet Lewis ruled, in effect, that the CIA had the right to conceal its carelessness.

Meanwhile, CIA defector Philip Agee, working with known communist agents, has appealed to disgruntled CIA employees to send him "leads, tips, suggestions." He wrote in a widely circulated bulletin: "We are particularly anxious to receive, anonymously if you desire, copies of U.S. diplomatic lists and U.S. embassy staff and/or telephone directories from any countries." Agee has already laid out the biographies of 700 U.S. undercover agents in a book published by Lyle Stuart Inc.

CIA Director Stansfield Turner told us that Agee's publications have been "very damaging."

Clearly, the CIA is trying to stop the damaging flow of unfavorable publicity. It is less than enthusiastic, for example, about an investigation by Rep. Les Aspin (D-Wis.) into an alleged CIA attempt to discredit a Greek journalist.

He is Elias Demetracopoulos, who was driven from his homeland in 1967 by the military junta in Athens. He set

up shop in a tiny hotel room in Washington and proceeded to lambast the colonels and their American apologists at every opportunity. Pro-junta officials in the Nixon administration hated him so that they connived to send him back to Greece to face certain torture and possible death.

Apparently, his persistent criticism also incurred the wrath of the CIA. Twice last year, unfavorable allegations about him appeared in print. In both instances, the charges were attributed to CIA records.

Demetracopoulos told us: "These allegations are fabrications used for a long time by the CIA to discredit me, and they are refuted by CIA documents in my possession." He showed us the documents to back up his statement.

Several months ago, the Senate and House Intelligence committees sought to determine whether the CIA had engaged in a deliberate attempt to smear Demetracopoulos. Aspin put the issue directly to the CIA director. It raised questions, said Aspin, "about the use of files . . . to discredit people."

Turner replied carefully: "I find no evidence we have provided files on Demetracopoulos to anybody."

A few weeks ago, the agency also responded to specific questions from Aspin. Again, the CIA denied having shared its Demetracopoulos file with anyone. But the denial astonishingly was classified.

Because the letter was classified, Demetracopoulos cannot see it and, therefore, cannot defend himself against the CIA's charges.